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“She departed to her house”: Another Dimension of the Syrophoenician Mother’s Faith in Mark 7:24–30

MATTHEW L. SKINNER

Some of the most memorable scenes in the Gospel according to Mark provide snapshots of characters displaying exemplary faith. Distinguishing themselves from a “faithless generation” (9:19), these people speak words and perform actions that explicitly mark them as people of faith: a paralyzed man’s associates (2:5), a long-suffering woman (5:34), Jairus (5:36), the father of a spirit-possessed boy (9:23–24), and Bartimaeus (10:52). The stories of these characters, along with other comments about faith and its absence (as in 4:40; 6:5–6; 11:22–24), prompt readers to consider the multiple facets of what it means to approach and respond to Jesus in faith. At the same time, Mark includes additional passages that depict other people encountering Jesus in similar ways, even though their actions are not expressly identified as “faith.” These characters’ interactions with Jesus warrant consideration in any attempt to analyze this Gospel’s notion of faith and the effects of faith.

The Syrophoenician mother of a demon-afflicted girl in Mark 7:24–30 de-

The Syrophoenician mother stands as an exemplar of faith not because she has so much of it, but because she enacts it so consistently and deeply. Hers is an insistent, perceptive, and trusting faith that provides insight into the faith we exhibit as well.

serves to be on the short list of characters who display exemplary faith. Even though Jesus credits this woman's λόγος (speech), and not her πίστις (faith), as the impetus for her daughter's deliverance, nevertheless Mark presents her as one who exhibits faith in several ways and in multiple contexts as her circumstances change over the course of her story. In this essay I will examine various dimensions of her faith, including one that interpreters of this passage frequently overlook. Numerous other exegetes, to be sure, note and celebrate this woman's obvious faith in her acts of approaching and dialoguing with Jesus.¹ But, as I will explain, she also expresses faith in her return trip to her home at the story's conclusion. Her willingness and ability to leave Jesus and make this journey alone deepen her portrait as a faithful exemplar and allow the complete range of her actions to provide a fuller characterization of the nature of faith.

Before exploring the Syrophoenician mother's trek home as an additional articulation of her faith, it will be profitable to review her story and parts of it that have provoked particular questions among commentators. These brief comments will both highlight reasons for regarding her disputatious encounter with Jesus as an expression of faith and put forward my perspectives on a number of the exegetical debates surrounding this passage.

THE WOMAN'S STORY

Mark's story of the Syrophoenician mother who on her daughter's behalf confronts Jesus in Tyre has aroused consternation in many interpreters. The evidence from the other Synoptic Gospels may imply that Mark's ancient audiences had as many questions as do modern ones. From Matthew's similar yet tamer account of a Canaanite woman who entreats Jesus to deliver her daughter from a demon, we can reasonably assume that at least one of Mark's earliest readers found reasons to put the story in a public setting, to have the female petitioner display insight into Jesus' identity as "Son of David," to include Jesus' voicing his specific understanding that he was sent "only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," and to call unmistakable attention to the mother's "faith" (Matt 15:21–28). Paying attention to these details in Matthew's version makes contrasting aspects of Mark's appear in greater relief. These include the absence of any other characters present in the house in Mark's scene; the lack of any clear christological titles spoken by the Markan woman; Mark's silence concerning a specific rationale for Jesus' refusal to heal, delivered with a stinging epithet; and Mark's arresting statement from Jesus that the woman's assertive and penetrating riposte (remember, he credits her λόγος)

¹For a sampling of recent commentators who, for various reasons, name her actions in vv. 25–26, 28 as enacting or evidencing "faith," see Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel according to Saint Mark* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991) 181–184; Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Second Gospel* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2000) 75–78; Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002) 144–148. Moloney groups the Syrophoenician woman with Bartimaeus and the father of 9:14–29 in a category of extraordinary persons who present themselves to Jesus "bringing nothing except faith" (*Gospel of Mark*, 210–211).

finally compels him to act.² Why Luke omits this story entirely—whether because of the offense of Jesus’ refusal and insult, anxiety stemming from a woman’s ability to prevail over Jesus in a theological argument, or any other reason—remains anyone’s guess.

“contemporary interpreters have winced at several aspects of the scene and their potential implications for an understanding of the Christian gospel, Jesus in his first-century context, the nature of faith, or biblical perspectives on ethnicity and gender”

Contemporary interpreters have likewise read Mark 7:24–30 and winced at several aspects of the scene and their potential implications for an understanding of the Christian gospel, Jesus in his first-century context, the nature of faith, or biblical perspectives on ethnicity and gender. I do not rehearse all of the most interesting discussions here, for others have performed this service elsewhere.³ Most important to note, as the majority of interpreters conclude, is the fact that there is no strong evidence to suppose that Jesus in v. 27 does anything other than refuse the woman’s request that he expel the unclean spirit from her daughter. Jesus does not test or sympathetically prompt the woman, playfully or otherwise, to encourage her to make a more obvious or complete declaration of her faith, for the two of them are the only ones present in the house, and Jesus elsewhere displays no difficulty in discerning true faith or its potential in similar actions performed by others who come to him seeking help (see 2:5; 5:34). When he refers to her and her daughter as “dogs,” he does not evoke an endearing image or create a jocular mood; he insults them with a familiar pejorative.⁴ For her part, of course, the woman appears to handle the situation with great aplomb, not challenging the

²Regarding the Syrophoenician woman’s calling to Jesus as κύριος in v. 28, there is no compelling reason to follow the NIV and RSV in rendering her address as “Lord.” The respectful “Sir” of the NRSV rightly suggests that she does not make a claim about Jesus’ identity, for no other Markan character (unless Mark suggests that John the Baptist speaks the Isaianic quotation in 1:3) refers to Jesus as κύριος. The narrative may offer the word in 7:28 as a kind of theological double entendre for readers, but we need not ascribe any additional significance to it in the context of the exchange between the woman and Jesus.

³See Sharon H. Ringe, “A Gentile Woman’s Story, Revisited: Rereading Mark 7.24–31,” in *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 2001) 79–100; Hisako Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark: A Japanese Feminist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994) 51–61; William R. G. Loader, “Challenged at the Boundaries: A Conservative Jesus in Mark’s Tradition,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 63 (1996) 45–51. Ringe’s essay offers insightful reflections on the matters of Jesus’ insulting the woman, his claim that “the children” have a temporal priority in receiving the gospel’s benefits, and the woman’s riposte. Her analysis performs the important yet difficult task of showing how Mark 7:24–30 resists sympathetic readers’ efforts to arrive at interpretations that are free from repellent implications concerning either Jesus or the woman and what she represents.

⁴On the pejorative, see Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8* (New York: Doubleday, 2000) 463–464. The specific target of the insult—either the woman as Gentile or the woman as member of an oppressive class—remains a matter of debate among interpreters. On the economic tensions in first-century Tyre and the woman’s possible belonging to a privileged group that Jesus might regard as perpetuating injustice, see Ringe, “Gentile Woman’s Story, Revisited,” 84–86.

canine metaphor but reconfiguring it through her insistence that “the dogs” (Gentiles such as herself) do not need to wait for “the children” (the Jews) *first* to finish their food before they may feast on the crumbs.⁵ Both parties may eat simultaneously, if the dogs are nearby and all they seek are a few morsels. Apparently she believes that crumb-sized blessings will suffice to meet the need she lays before Jesus.

The woman's brief reply to Jesus in v. 28 is the only direct speech from her that Mark conveys to readers. As Sharon H. Ringe notes, this line of dialogue sits as the centerpiece to the story, the hinge that holds it all together.⁶ The Syrophoenician mother's statement constitutes the core of the account in a structural sense, as the midpoint of a literary parallelism, situated between two spoken responses from Jesus. Her words also form the rhetorical core, for it is her claim (her argument, her λόγος) that changes the story and moves Jesus to act on her behalf. Her riposte to Jesus indicates many things, including the theological truth that the gospel should bring benefits to Gentiles even now, at this point in the story (after all, Jesus himself has just totally redefined Jewish notions of impurity in 7:1–23).

Obviously the woman makes a good argument. She does not devote herself to the question of whether she and her daughter deserve to be likened to mongrels, but she disarms the metaphor's primary intent by reconfiguring the metaphorical context, employing the metaphor against Jesus and his initial, dismissive point.⁷ Her reply displays a dogged cleverness and wit, but Jesus does not relent because of her ability to make a creative turn of an image. It is the theological implications of her statement that bring about Jesus' change of heart. Her words concede the privileges of Israel (as “the children” who are fed at the table) but argue that such privileges do not preclude benefits also falling *at the same time* to Gentiles seeking a taste. Her comments confess that only a table scrap of the gospel is necessary to liberate the possessed girl, and that Jesus has no compelling basis (or, perhaps, no ability) to withhold these benefits of abundance until a later time. At this point, she somehow appears to understand even more acutely than Jesus the potential and

⁵My interpretation, that Jesus refuses and insults the woman because of her identity as a Gentile, likely falls within the range of those that Ringe labels “anti-Jewish” (“Gentile Woman's Story, Revisited,” 82, 93–94, 99). Such an interpretation, however, need not lump Jesus or other first-century Jews under a caricatured indictment of widespread “ethnic exclusivism.” Ringe's attention to the dangers of such readings is salutary, and her alternative interpretation, that Jesus criticizes the woman's complicity in oppressive economic structures, allows a thicker description of the complex array of relevant social factors. Nevertheless, Mark focuses on the woman's Gentile identity (in the Greek text of v. 26, the narrative introduces her as “a Greek”) as the primary indicator of her outsider status. Moreover, this scene serves as a transitional point in the plot that launches Jesus into additional ministry on behalf of Gentiles in 7:31–8:10 (see Susan Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel* [London: T & T Clark, 2004] 99–100). Ringe's appeal to Mark 5:1–20 as evidence of Jesus' willingness to assist Gentiles at other points in the plot cannot establish that the Gerasene demoniac is a Gentile, and it must take into account the fact that Mark stages that scene as an encounter between Jesus and the legion of demons, not one between Jesus and a man asking for help.

⁶Ringe, “Gentile Woman's Story, Revisited,” 82–83.

⁷The woman's failure to combat the injurious metaphor itself does not suggest a show of virtuous humility. We should not assume that willfully accepting possibly gratuitous degradation is a dimension of the “faith” she displays in this passage. I imagine that a person in her situation would maintain a driving focus on only that which is necessary to secure healing for her child. I would hope that she and her daughter might return to Jesus later for a follow-up discussion that would begin with, “Now, about that ‘dog’ comment....”

the scope of the reign of God that he proclaims. At least, she understands that there is no clear reason why this reign should not begin to be scattered to others right now. Like Jacob after his nocturnal wrestling match near the ford of the Jabbok (Gen 32:22–32), she will not let go without a blessing. Like Jacob’s mysterious opponent, Jesus accedes.

THE WOMAN’S FAITH

Mark relates direct speech from only a few of the characters named in this essay’s opening paragraph. The Syrophoenician woman’s handful of words in 7:28 do not make her exemplary simply by their presence in the narrative. Rather, the message she speaks sets her apart as a person who exhibits faith. Her speech, as discussed above, conveys volumes about what she expects from Jesus, and why. She does not appeal to standards of fairness or pity but makes a theological claim about the expansiveness and power of God’s reign. This, then, forms the first dimension of what we can justifiably consider her “faith”: her conviction that she does not need a seat at the table for her daughter to receive what she needs. If Jesus is for real, only a morsel can suffice. This cognitive, visionary λόγος that leads Jesus to pronounce the demon’s expulsion indicates faith insofar as it indicates confidence and insight about the universal and far-reaching implications of the gospel Jesus preaches about the emerging reign of God.

“her desperate, begging pleas and persistence do not represent alternatives to faith; they give added definition to what faith is”

A second dimension of this woman’s faith reveals itself even prior to her quoted speech. Her initial attraction to Jesus and falling at his feet recall other stories of faithful people (see 5:22, 27, 33), and her refusal to accept no for an answer resembles Bartimaeus’s stubborn cries of faith (see 10:48). Her desperate, begging pleas and persistence do not represent alternatives to faith; they give added definition to what faith is, and what it looks like when expressed as dire supplications.⁸

Mark’s failure to name “faith” as operative in 7:24–30 does not suggest that the Syrophoenician mother’s theological reasoning and unyielding insistence constitute something other than faith. Mark never attempts a precise definition of faith in terms of its manner and content (although 11:23 contrasts faith with doubt), yet this Gospel’s collection of healing stories all contribute to a fuller mosaic that displays faith and its many dimensions.⁹ Faith’s resolute confidence emerges through a variety of particular expressions, and the Syrophoenician woman, due to the

⁸Not only does she exemplify *faith* through this persistence, but in the Gospel of Mark the woman “acts as a model of discipleship on account of her courage and her refusal to give up hope” (Miller, *Women*, 106).

⁹I do not assume that the Syrophoenician woman is *required* to have faith simply because she is the beneficiary of a miracle. For a brief corrective to the often repeated but incorrect claim that Mark presents faith as an indispensable condition for miracles to occur, see Dowd, *Reading Mark*, 60–62.

unique details of her story and her spoken rationale, shows us more of these expressions than do most other Markan characters. The two dimensions of the Syrophoenician woman's faith that I have discussed thus far are different in manner, though complementary in the overarching context of this story. Confidence and insistence characterize both her approach (vv. 25–26) and her speech (v. 28), but we must respect the differences in the various aspects of her encounter with Jesus. Once Jesus refuses her request, the mode of her faith shifts from beseeching to contending.

Such a portrait of insightful, tenacious faithfulness acquires additional significance when we consider that the Gentile who enacts it is a woman. David Rhoads correctly observes: "Gender is not essential to this episode....The story would have worked if a Gentile male had come on behalf of his daughter or son. Yet this observation makes the presence of a woman here all the more remarkable, and it changes everything."¹⁰ Gender is not essential, but it is quite salient. That a persistent *woman* in first-century Tyre manages to change Jesus' mind by means of a theological argument allows the passage to make even more striking statements about Christianity and social construals of gender, in any century.¹¹ That the story includes multiple dimensions of this woman's faith is also highly significant, for it militates against supposing that Mark regards a woman's faith as characterized by only something like nagging insistence. The Syrophoenician mother instead enacts a faith that is multifaceted, deep, and responsive. Uncovering all its facets therefore contributes to a richer picture of what it means for any human being to approach and respond to Jesus in faith.

ANOTHER DIMENSION OF FAITH

There remains one more dimension of this woman's faith. The narrative calls attention to it in v. 30 through a clear reference to a change in setting. Such a reference begs us to consider why and how the woman needs to move from one house to another. This journey back to her home requires and enacts her faith in a new way.

Mark's story occurs in two separate, equally nondescript settings. Where form criticism might emphasize the final verse—"She departed to her house, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone" (7:30, my translation)—as an obligatory verification of the exorcism, narrative criticism notes the express change in scenery as an impulse to consider what this shift means for the relationships among characters. Moreover, the mention of a new setting calls for attention to the relationships between the two settings and the significance of what moves the narrated action from one place to another.

¹⁰David Rhoads, "Jesus and the Syrophoenician Woman," in *Reading Mark, Engaging the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004) 90.

¹¹The other side of this coin, of course, is the disturbing fact that it is precisely a woman whom Jesus demeans without apology (see Ringe, "Gentile Woman's Story, Revisited," 99). No amount of celebrating the Syrophoenician woman's faithfulness can negate the layers of offense that the story can pose.

The bulk of the scene's action occurs inside a single house (identified by the word οἶκος in v. 24), which Jesus hoped would render him invisible or inaccessible to the locals. The action in this house resembles other Markan scenes inside houses where people seek out Jesus (1:33; 2:1; 3:20), where Jesus performs healings (1:29; 2:1; 5:38), and where people discuss theological realities with Jesus (7:17; 9:28, 33; 10:10). The narrative's brief mention of a second house (οἶκος in v. 30), the woman's own, reminds us that the setting where she encounters Jesus is separate from the setting where she knows with certainty that the demon has left her child. Just as Jesus sends others back to their homes after some healings (2:11; 5:19; 8:26), Jesus dismisses the Syrophenician woman. Her complete experience, then, from supplicant to relieved mother, requires her presence in two different, yet related houses.¹² Mark's instantaneous description of her journey from the first house to the second—related with a single participle, ἀπελθοῦσα (she departed)—belies the difficulty of her travel, the distance that she must traverse.

Her travel is potentially difficult because she does it alone, fueled by Jesus' promise but still without final certainty. Jesus' ability to drive out the unclean spirit from a distance magnifies his authority as an exorcist, and it also allows him to remain in the first house. He need not accompany the woman to her house. We might suggest numerous conclusions from Jesus' choice—if it is indeed *his* choice—to perform the miracle in this way. Based on v. 24, perhaps he wants to remain hidden indoors. Based on his apparently low view of Gentiles expressed in v. 27, perhaps the prospect of entering a Gentile's home repulses him.¹³ As enticing as it is to engage in such speculations, none of them allows us to forget that the woman, if she is to know at last that her daughter has received what she sought, has no choice but to take Jesus at his word and leave him. His performance of the exorcism in this manner does not attempt to re-humiliate this woman or drive her back into an existence devoid of the gospel's blessings. He gives her what she wants, but it still will take an additional act of faith for her to realize this for sure.

The long-distance miracle therefore alters the woman's circumstances and allows her faith to manifest itself once again.¹⁴ With the simple words "She departed to her house" Mark depicts her enacting a confident, anticipatory faith that allows her to cross the distance from the house of the promise ("the demon has gone out of your daughter") to the house of the realization ("[she] found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone"; my translation). Whether the woman makes the

¹²There is no significance to the fact that two different words for *house* appear in this story. Markan usage of οἶκος and οἶκος suggests that they are synonymous terms in this Gospel (Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *Narrative Space and Mythic Meaning in Mark* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986] 107–108).

¹³On suspicions that the Synoptic Gospels describe Jesus healing people in Gentiles' homes from a distance (Mark 7:24–30; Matt 8:5–13; Luke 7:1–10) because of concerns about "purity," see Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26* (Dallas: Word, 1989) 382–383.

¹⁴It is interesting to note that Matthew's story of the Canaanite woman, which emphasizes her faith in 15:28, misses the ways in which the narration of a changed setting further signals the woman's faith. That story ends with no character's subsequent discovery of the healed daughter, only a narrator's summary statement that she "was healed instantly."

trip home with hopeful excitement or nervous trepidation, Mark does not say. What this brief account does say, however, is that she makes the trip without any tangible collateral or Jesus' presence as a pledge to insure the validity of his promise. In her willingness to take Jesus at his word, to know that it is time to leave off contending and to start traveling home, she displays faith.

Mark's story of the Syrophoenician mother remains a text that will not be tamed, one that resists fully satisfying interpretations. Even while highlighting the depth and breadth of her faith, I have touched on some of the notorious details of this passage, particularly Jesus' insulting denial of the woman's initial request. Christian interpreters, for various reasons, usually find that this passage sparks ambivalent reactions toward the Jesus it portrays.¹⁵ My attempt to amplify the woman's faith does not mean to suggest that such an interpretive approach mitigates the text's difficulties.

From the perspectives of Jesus and the evangelist, the Syrophoenician woman dwells at the edges, bumping up against boundaries of culture, location, and prejudice. Within the cast of Gospel characters, however, she stands near the center, because her story gives significant definition to a Markan understanding of faith and its expressions. Several dimensions of her faith emerge through the different ways in which her circumstances require her to speak and act—both with Jesus and, at the end of their meeting, apart from him. She stands as an exemplar of faith, not because she necessarily has a large amount of it, but because she enacts it consistently and deeply. Hers is an insistent, perceptive, and trusting faith. We see it in her beseeching, contending, and traveling. This substantial faith provides insight into her story and into the stories of other characters in Mark who approach Jesus expecting to receive a benefit from him. As Mark's Gospel continues to speak to Christians in our day, this mother provides insight into the faith we exhibit as well. ⊕

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¹⁵Sharon H. Ringe's two essays on this passage together offer a fine example of an interpreter's ambivalence. The changes in perspective between her earlier essay ("A Gentile Woman's Story," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985] 65–72) and her later one ("Gentile Woman's Story, Revisited") show how a particular Christian interpreter encounters much to celebrate and much to criticize in Mark 7:24–30.